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# Curriculum differentiation: a study with institutionalized young's attending vocational education

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## Abstract

Curriculum differentiation stresses different learning contexts and it has assumed a strategic target in the promotion of young's education and training opportunities.

This study is part of an ongoing empirical work, which aims to know the characteristics and perspectives of vocational identity of some institutionalized young's, fulfilling judicial (court) measures, and attending vocational education in Portuguese Educational Centers. The methodological plan used included a mixed approach which beheld two different moments: 1) sociodemographic data; the application of the *Dellas Identity Status Inventory Occupation* scale, and 2) semi-structured interviews. The participants were institutionalized young's between the ages of 13-20 years old.

Regarding the results, the participant young's seem to reveal difficulties in defining and having a perspective of a clear vocational position.

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## 1. Introduction

In the global educational changes, the standardizing of the curricular decisions can be interpreted in the context

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of the following question: “Are curriculum and instruction in fact becoming more similar about the world?” (Anderson-Levitt, 2008, p.349). Answering to the question, the curriculum intent is apparently becoming more uniform around the world and what actually happens in the classroom varies widely (*ibid.*). This ambivalent and apparent contradiction presents an important opportunity to study the two intertwined faces of the curricular coin: on the one hand, the uniformity promoted by the borrowing and lending policies (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012), on the other hand, the curricular diversity, namely the curricular project, is focused on the problem of access to school, on the targeted groups (Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008), on the multicultural contexts (Kanu, 2006), and on the special educational needs. However, it is not possible to analyse the educational and social changes without a deep study of the practices and politics of the curriculum differentiation (Pacheco, 2012; Guimarães, Silva & Pacheco, 2012).

This paper is part of a broader ongoing research project, entitled *Feedback, Identity and Trajectories in Education: Dynamics and Consequences* (FITE- Contract PTDC/CPE-PEC/121238/2010), where a study is being developed on the “Development of vocational identity of institutionalized young’s in Portuguese educational centers”. Specifically, regarding the characteristics of vocational identity of institutionalized young people attending courses of Education and Training for Adults (therefore EFA) and perceptions of value of some of them on vocational education, we are on the process of discussing the relevance and suitability of the EFA curriculum in the construction and development on their vocational identity and life competencies.

On the 21st century, in the field of juvenile justice, the Portuguese legal system based on international models determines that all children and young people who require protection, or have committed acts which qualify as crimes, are designed to ensure their civil and social rights by the Guardianship Act Education (Law No 166/99 of 14 October, therefore LTE) in force since 2001. LTE is applicable to young’s of ages ranging between 12 and 16 years old, and it is also for those who have not completed 18 years (upon legal decision in the first instance), through measures of Guardianship Education (therefore MTE). These measures include the internment in educational centers (article 4<sup>th</sup>, paragraph 1, LTE) and are applied under three regimes: open, semi-open and closed. Educational centers (EC), being under the control of the Ministry of Justice, are establishments of educative intervention, and aim to provide young people with temporary absence of their usual social contexts; the use of educative programs and teaching methods to empower young people on values and enable them in the future to lead a life with social and legal responsibilities (article 17<sup>th</sup>, LTE). Concretely, the teaching methods used in Portuguese Educational Centers (EC) are based on the vocational education, in which institutionalized young’s have the possibility to engage in EFA courses, accessing conditions to develop some competences in order to perform a future job. The engagement of young people in vocational training “holds an important formative and developmental value, to great effect both in identity construction of individuals or in the process of their social integration” (Gouveia-Pereira, 2008, p.111).

EFA courses are “pathways in education and training vocational qualifications, designed for young people less than 15 years old at risk of leaving school or who have left school before the end of compulsory education” article (3<sup>rd</sup> article, Law No.18228/2008) The main goal of these courses is to provide educational qualifications and/or professional skills, in a perspective of (re)integration of young people in the labour market and seek to contribute to a deficit reduction of school and professional qualification of the Portuguese population (Canelas, 2008). Regarding the type of vocational training, the EFA courses offer a dual certification, which is simultaneously academic and professional. Assuming an equivalence training to the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> cycles of basic education and secondary education (known as type B1, B2, B3, and ES), also provide the acquisition of school certificates that correspond to the respective levels of learning and vocational qualifications, trying to ensure both the communicability between education and the world of work (Quintas, 2008).

European framework and Portuguese reality stress the vocational education and curriculum differentiation as a strategy to reduce the school early leaving and to the acquisition of the relevant skills needed in this “knowledge society”. Education and training are viewed as a key to a smarter, greener, more inclusive world for engaging young’s in a sustainable life design (European Commission, 2013).

## 2. Methodology

The design of our research belongs to the interpretative paradigm and our main goal is to know the value attributed to vocational education by institutionalized young’s in EC, regarding their vocational characteristics and future perspectives in developing life competencies.

The data used in this study was taken from an ongoing empirical research on institutionalized young's vocational identity. The methodological plan used included a mixed approach (Creswell & Clark, 2007) and the data was collected in two different moments, during the academic year of 2012/2013.

### 2.1 Participants

In a first moment, the sociodemographic sheets and the DISI-O scale were applied to 136 young's between the ages of 13-20 years old ( $M=16,5$ ;  $SD=1,24$ ), institutionalized in 5 Portuguese EC. These participants were all male and were attending 11 different EFA courses: Waiter, Kitchen, Hotel Maintenance Operator, Woodwork, Gardening and Green Spaces, Pre Printing Operator, Painting and Construction, Electricity Facilities, Carpentry, Locksmith and Installation and Computers Repair.

In the second moment of the research, from the preliminary results of DISI-O scale, 14 young's between the ages of 14 and 19 years old ( $M = 16.7$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), were selected to participate in the interviews. These participants were fulfilling legal measures for having committed crimes such as robbery, offense to the physical integrity, property and rape. They glowing measures in the judicial system were of three types: open, semi-open and closed system. Depending on the severity of the acts committed these measures ranged from 8 up to 36 months.

In terms of educative projects these 14 young's were attending some of the EFA courses designated above.

### 2.2 Instruments and procedure

In a first moment, in 5 Portuguese EC, which authorized this study, sociodemographic data was collected, to ascertain both the ages and courses attended by the young people. It was also applied *Dellas Identity Status Inventory Occupation* scale (DISI-O, Dellas & Jernigan, 1981), which has already been adapted to the Portuguese population by Taveira and Campos (1987), in order to understand how the young's vocational identity was being resolved. This scale has 35 items sorted into five stages of vocational identity, similar to the taxonomy developed by Marcia (1966).

The first author of this paper in the courses above mentioned has supervised the filling of the instruments. This task took place in the normal hours of the EFA courses and the participants cooperated voluntarily, taking the necessary time to properly answer the full scale. Statistical analyses employed SPSS 20.0 for Windows.

In a second moment, from preliminary results of the first moment, semi structure interviews were conducted. The interviews were carried out using a guide, in the same 5 Portuguese EC, according to the young's availability.

## 3. Results

This paper considers part of the data as resulting of the two distinct moments described above. Concretely, some of sociodemographic data will be presented as well as the results obtained by the application of DISI-O scale, regarding the evaluation of the resolution modes of the young's vocational identity. Sequentially, the content analysis of two of the questions included in the semi structured interviews, which meets the main objective of this work.

### 3.1 First methodological moment

In Table 1 it is possible to read that the mean age of the 136 institutionalized young's is approximately 16 years. Regarding the age of these young's in the different courses attended were very close, being quite evident that the youngest participants were attending the Installation and Computer Repair course, and the oldest the Hotel Operator Maintenance course. It is also possible to read that the most attended was the Woodwork course and the least was the Carpentry course.

Table 1  
Descriptive Statistics of Young ages and courses attended

EFA Courses	Young Ages		N
	M	DP	
Waiter	16,55	1,128	11
Hotel Maintenance Operator	17,24	,970	17
Kitchen	16,44	1,130	9
Woodwork	16,35	1,056	26
Gardening and Green Spaces	16,08	1,782	12
Pre Printing Operator	17,00	1,069	8
Painting and Civil Construction	15,93	1,439	14
Electricity Facilities	16,43	,978	21
Carpentry	17,00	1,225	5
Locksmith	17,00	1,265	6
Installation and Computer Repair	15,57	1,397	7
Total	16,48	1,241	136

In Figure 1, regarding the EFA courses attended it is possible to read the means results of the evaluation of the resolution modes of the young's vocational identity in the 5 dimensions of DISI-O Scale: Achievement; Moratorium; Foreclosure; Diffusion-Diffusion; Diffusion Luck.

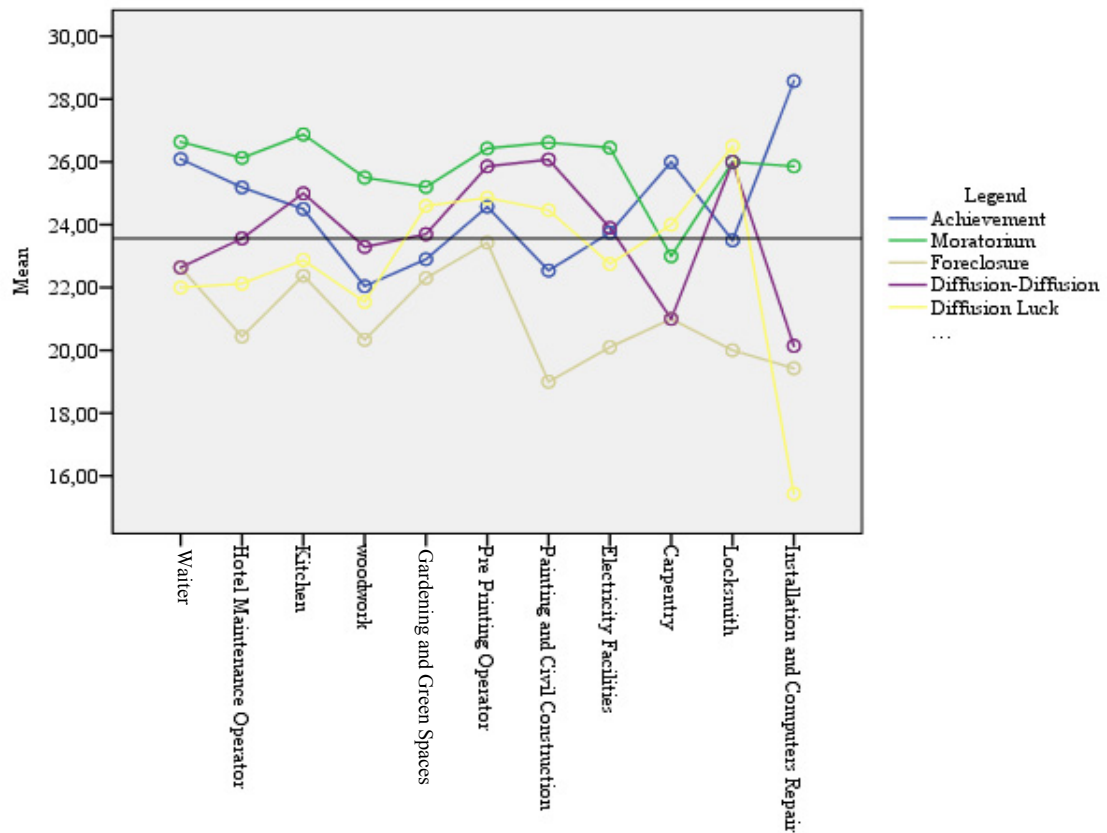


Fig. 1. Descriptive statistics in DISI-O dimensions by EFA courses

Looking at Figure 1 it is possible to read that most of the institutionalized young's tend to occupy the dimension of *Moratorium* identity, which is characterized by young people who are living in a period of exploration of the issues of identity, while expressing difficulty in making choices. It is also possible to see that the training group more certain of their vocational identity was attending the Installation and Computer Repair. At the same the more diffuse ones were attending Pre Printing operator; Painting and Civil Construction and Locksmith courses.

### 3.2 Second methodological moment

In this second moment of our research, 14 youngs agreed to participate. Summarily, these youngs were attending EFA courses such as: Waiter, Hotel Maintenance Operator, Woodwork, Gardening and Green Spaces, Painting and Civil Construction, Electricity Facilities, Locksmith and Installation and Computer Repair.

The two questions that we will deal with, which meet the objective of this work, are the following:

- a) Do you think the training you are receiving meets what you would like to come to do as a job?
- b) Can attending an EFA course in Educational Centers be a good way to help decide what you may come to be or do in future?

The information collected was analyzed by a content analysis process (Bardin, 2011). The unit of analysis is the young's answers and the emergent categories from this content analysis are personal and social aspects that young people seem to value for their vocational future perspectives.

For the first question "Do you think the training you are receiving meets what you would like to come to do as a job?", the most frequently cited response implicated comments involving more personal aspects related to dislike of the course, such as:

*I do like this course, because I would like to be fireman* [Kitchen, 4A];

*No, because I would like to be a Vet* [Kitchen, 31A];

*No because I would like to be a Police man* [Woodwork, 3B];

*No, because I would like to be a footballer* [Gardening and Green Spaces, 9E];

But some of them said:

*Yes, is this I want to do* [Kitchen, 5A];

*Yes, maybe with this course I will find a job* [Gardening and Green Spaces, 10B];

*Yes, I have to learn something* [Hotel Maintenance Operator, 16E];

*... it is very soon to think in a job, but think it does not hurt* [Hotel Maintenance Operator, 12D]

In terms of social aspects, of some young seems to be a concern and important to get a job, for example:

*...I would like to be a mechanic, but maybe it helps me to find a job* [Painting and Civil construction, 1C];

*... it will helps me to find a job, whether I like it or not, but it always helps* [Waiter, 8A].

From the young's answers to the second question "Can attending an EFA course in Educational Centers be a good way to help decide what you may come to be or do in future?", appear to us to be related with both emergent categories in personal and social aspects, regarding the course has an opportunity to learn and a chance of employability. For example:

*Yes, I think it will help me to work in restaurants and hotels* [Kitchen, 4A];

*Yes, I think it will help me to work in restaurants or hotels or even coffee shops* [Kitchen, 5A];

*Yes it is a way of improve myself and my competencies* [Waiter, 8A]

*Maybe not, but it is a way to learn something* [Hotel Maintenance Operator, 16E];

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

Most of the young's of our study tend to be in the *Moratorium* identity dimension. This exploration period shows the importance of helping young people to build an individual's life path, thus the vocational curriculum can be a proactive and preventive measure in the way of adaptability to face moments of transition. Specially youngs that are

in a vulnerable situation like our specific participants. Promoting vocational curriculum can be a facilitator of decision making, because it contributes to a greater awareness of the tasks and the discovery of strategies to deal with the unexpected in a current context of life in a constantly changing and global society.

In the future of young people, specially these youngs, that the integration in an EC has the main objective of socialization towards educating "allowing them in the future, lead your life socially and legally responsible" (article 17<sup>th</sup>, paragraph 1, LTE). These vocational courses in the EC should also be a learning opportunity for the youngs to face the less positive moments in their lives and help them in being more resilient and facing transitions with greater certainty.

In previous works (eg.:Martins & Carvalho, 2013) we discussed the importance of the vocational curriculum. The curriculum of vocational training can enable or empower young people to develop essential skills, to acquire knowledge, and knowing that the curriculum is a powerful way to acquire knowledge (Young, 2011), the knowledge so described assumes interaction and convergence with the curriculum to develop the young's vocational identity.

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